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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - May 5, 2006

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11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by  
Embassy Minsk.

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International Relations  
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12. Lukashenko: Consolidation of Political Forces Is No Problem

During a meeting in St. Petersburg, Aleksandr Lukashenko told Russian President Putin that the consolidation of political forces is not a problem for Belarus and was quoted that almost all of the Belarusian population voted for the incumbent in the March presidential elections. Lukashenko reportedly dismissed the opposition as one or two thousand people who attempted to "destabilize something for money" and told Putin, "That's why we can only talk about the consolidation of this part of society."

13. Lukashenko to Meet with Putin Again after G-8 Summit

At a meeting in St. Petersburg on April 28, Russian President Vladimir Putin invited Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko to visit Moscow in late July for talks on the Commonwealth of Independent States. During the meeting, Lukashenko told Putin that the Europeans and Americans are "still positive about cooperation with Belarus despite hue and cry" and that Belarus cooperates with them in "vital matters, including the economic sphere."

14. Ukraine Agrees to Develop Military Hardware with Belarus

The Ukrainian government recently approved an agreement with Belarus to conduct joint research and development of new weaponry and other military hardware. The Ukrainian and Belarusian Defense and Industrial Ministries will oversee cooperation. Moreover, the countries will form a joint working group to meet yearly.

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Civil Society  
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15. BKGB to Identify "Za Svobodu" Funding

On May 4, the Belarusian Committee for Security (BKGB) announced that it is tracking the financial sources of the "Za Svobodu" ("For Freedom") social-political movement, which opposition leader and former presidential candidate Alexksandr Milinkevich promoted prior to and following the March presidential elections. Meanwhile, regional activists of the youth organization Zubr were summoned by the BKGB for questioning.

16. Grafittist Trial Postponed, Supporters Arrested

The trial of opposition youth activist and graffitist Artur Finkevich opened in the Pervomaisky District in Minsk on May 4. However, the judge declared a recess until May 10 because city maintenance authorities did not properly document the USD 16,370 in damages allegedly caused by Finkevich. Mr. Finkevich, a leader of the unregistered youth group known as "Malady Front," was arrested on January 30 for allegedly painting on a building wall, "We want a new one [president]" and faces up to 12 years in prison for malicious hooliganism and large-scale property damage. Police arrested eight Finkevich supporters after they staged a demonstration outside the courthouse. The arrests included the nephew of jailed former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin and four others who were later sentenced to five days in jail.

#### 17. Kozulin's Lawyer Acquitted

On April 26, Igor Rynkevich, a lawyer for former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, was acquitted on charges of swearing at police officers and resisting arrest. The officer who brought the charges did not appear in Moskovsky district court. Two other policemen testified that they did not witness Mr. Rynkevich swear or resist arrest near the Oktyabrsky district police station on March 2 where Rynkevich had arrived with opposition activists to visit Mr. Kozulin.

#### 18. Youths Arrested for Displaying Pro-Opposition Newspapers

At least 20 young people were arrested by plainclothes police for displaying pro-opposition newspapers during a media exhibition at the BelExpo Center in Minsk. The youths were apprehended after they opened copies of *Tovarishch*, *Narodnaya Volya*, and *Nasha Niva* near the stall of the largest government-

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controlled newspaper *Sovetskaya Belarussiya*. A senior Minsk city police officer warned journalists at the exhibition that they might be held responsible for organizing the "flash mob" and provoking the youths' illegal acts. The youths were later released.

#### 19. Head of Writer's Union Fired from State University

Ales Pashkevich, chairman of the Union of Belarusian Writers was fired from his position as an associate professor at the Literature and Culture Department of the Belarusian State University (BGU). In the official dismissal order dated March 27, BGU Rector Vasily Strazhev states that Pashkevich was dismissed by mutual consent. Professor Pashkevich says that the BGU administration had planned to remove him for his dissident views and that he had promised to leave this fall. In 2003, the Supreme Certification Commission rejected Pashkevich's doctoral thesis and dissolved Pashkevich's department.

#### 10. Government Ends Investigation of Missing Journalist Again

The official investigation into the disappearance of independent journalist Dmitry Zadavsky was again suspended. On May 3, Zadavsky's mother was notified in a letter from the anti-corruption division of the Prosecutor General's Office that the government dropped its investigation under Part 6 of the Criminal Code's Article 246 because of "failure to find the person who went missing without a trace." In March 2002, the Minsk Regional Court sentenced two former members of the Almaz police unit to life imprisonment in connection with Zadavsky's disappearance. The Belarusian government had resumed its investigation in April 2005 after a previous suspension in spring 2004.

#### 11. Driving License Seized from United Civic Party Activist

On May 3, Minsk police seized the driving license and plate of Igor Shinkarik, leader of the Minsk branch of the United Civic Party. The seizure followed Shinkarik's arrest while he was

driving away from Bangalore Square, the site of a May 1 opposition rally. Mr. Shinkarik was charged with having a scratch on his car and driving with five passengers.

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Economy  
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¶12. Belarus Accrues Debt of 2.5 Billion Dollars

By April 1 Belarus' foreign and domestic debts totaled 2.5 billion USD by April. Foreign debt is approximately 30% of total debt while domestic debt amounts to 70%. Since January 1 foreign debt decreased 1.9% and domestic debt 0.7%. The increments of foreign and domestic debts were 0.1% and 0.3% per month, respectively.

¶13. Lower Chamber to Repeal Preferences for Foreign Investors

On May 4, the lower chamber of Belarus' parliament voted after a first reading to repeal article 95 and part 2 of article 82 of the Investment Code. These provisions had allowed foreign investors to retain all export revenues from sales of goods and services after taxes and other required fees. The repeal is intended to equalize conditions for foreign and domestic investors. On January 1, 2005, Belarus cancelled tax preferences for foreign investors. Yet, according to the government, foreign investment increased from 1.5 billion in 2005 to 1.8 billion in 2006.

¶14. Belarus to Increase Pensions by Seven Percent

On May 1, President Lukashenko signed a degree raising pensions by 7 percent to an average of 120 dollars. Lukashenko had previously raised pensions by 9% on January 1. Pensioners are approximately one-quarter of the Belarusian population.

¶15. Beltelcom Says Internet Users Up 5% during Jan-March 2006

On April 27, Belarus' Communication and IT Minister, Vladimir Goncharenko announced that the number of users of Beltelcom's data communications network increased from 37,600 to 39,500 between January and March 2006. Requests for corporate networks on IP-protocol increased to 1000 by April 1. Gorcharenko supports reducing tariffs on DSL-internet access.

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Quote of the Week  
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¶16. In an attempt to discredit opposition demonstrators,

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particularly parents who brought their children to the rallies, Belarusian Television asked an eight-year old, "What are you doing here?" The child replied, "My name is Kolya. I want a different president and our country to join the European Union."

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